Software is able to do almost an endless number of tasks, both good and evil. There are standards to keep software developers protected from ethical scrutiny as long as these guidelines are followed; these guidelines make up the ACM code of ethics. The ACM code of ethics is meant to protect not only the developer but also the public (1). The ACM code of ethics also provides a basis for immoral technological behavior to be tested against. The code of ethics is meant to protect, but it can also be used to carry out justice on those who have crossed the ethical lines described in the code. One example of such a violation can be seen in the case of Volkswagen engineer/software developer Oliver Schmidt (2).

The summary of the Volkswagen case is that Schmidt oversaw the development of a device that would operate completely differently during emission testing, so that the product could comply with the minimum emission rating in the U.S (2). Once the device was no longer being tested, it switched to the actual way the engine would operate which made emissions up to 40 times the allowed amount (2). Schmidt violated these following ethical guidelines: 1.2 – avoiding harm, 1.3- to be honest and trustworthy, 2.1- strive to achieve high quality in process and products, 2.2- high standards of professional competence and ethical practice, 2.5-evaluation of computer systems and their impacts, and 3.1- ensure the public good is the central concern (1). The device violates these rules because the emissions pollute the air which can cause harm to the public: 1.2, 2.5, 3.1; and the device deceived the test: 1.3, 2.1, 2.2.

To me, the device was harmful and deceitful, so of course it would have violated the code of ethics. The case does bring up many questions, like if an entire development team would be punished if code was found to be in violation, even if they did not work on that portion? The results more than likely differ from case to case. I do wish that those who benefitted most from and knew of the immoral device would be punished, but it seems only Schmidt and the CEO of that time were prosecuted; this limit is because of U.S. laws trying to reach a German based company (2). Another opinion I have is that these obvious cases of flaws in morality often take too long to sort out and get caught up in politics and red-tape, which is disheartening.

The impact of this case varies. It did show that the U.S. courts could combat violations from other countries’ companies but in a limited manner. The case also shows that the actual developer is not always prosecuted, but the manager. I am not sure if I always think that is proper, since it is impossible for a manager to be up to date on all portions of code for a project and what each portion does. The case was a success in showing that even large companies like Volkswagen need to respect the code of ethics; which makes me think of how Facebook had to go to the supreme court.

Overall, codes of ethics are meant to protect the common people from possible harm from technology developers, and ensure that a developer is competent and aware of a technology’s impact. I think the interpretation of judgement of whether a technology is immoral may vary, but in the case of Volkswagen it was obviously a violation of ethical standards.

References

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